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THE FUTURE OF LABOR UNIONS IN AFRICA

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Author: R. Thomas Lenaghan

KEY JUDGMENTS

The strength of the labor movement in Africa is quite limited and will remain so. In no African country can labor unions claim to represent a significant number of workers. In some countries, it makes little sense to even talk about labor unions, either because of the low level of industrial development or because political fragmentation and associated turbulence are so prevalent as to preclude significant labor organization on anything but the smallest scale.

There will be little potential for union-inspired political unrest in states where the government is determined to prevent the development of an independent labor movement. This will be true of the Afro-Marxist regimes of Angola, Ethiopia, and Mozambique in which labor unions are so closely welded to the ruling political party that they become instruments for enforcing "worker discipline" rather than vehicles for expressing worker discontent. Lack of unrest will also be true, if perhaps to a lesser degree, of such states as Kenya, Liberia, and Tanzania, where, although the fiction of worker-directed unions is maintained, strikes are illegal, and governments maintain tight control over the direction of the national federations.

Unions will most likely make their influence felt in countries in which they have a history of winning concessions from governments and/or in which they have established a tradition of acting as a force of political opposition. In such countries, unions are an integral part of the national political economy and have at least the potential to catalyze widespread unrest. Among the countries in this group are Burkina Faso, Ghana, Nigeria, Sudan, and Zambia.

In many countries, union-government conflict will be heightened by the current trend of African governments to enact austerity packages aimed at reducing the size of their inflated public sectors. Thus, countries facing unusually harsh economic circumstances likely will see an increasing level of worker discontent with governmental policies, which will add to the potential for union-organized disturbances.

The Soviet Union and other East bloc nations will maintain an active interest in cooperating with African unions but they are unlikely to win any greater political influence with such support. Similarly, there is little prospect that the Soviets can use African labor organizations as agents of destabilization against governments supportive of the West.

Libya will maintain influence in the Organization of African Unity's (OAU) pan-African labor organization, the Organization of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU), but the significance of that organization will continue to decline from its already low level. Thus Libyan activity in this area will pose no major threats.

OVERVIEW

African labor unions typically bear little resemblance to their Western counterparts. For example, their scope of activity is generally much wider than is the case for unions in the West. In many cases, African unions seem little concerned with the workplace, functioning instead as fraternal or political clubs for workers. Some characteristics which distinguish African unions from the familiar Western model of unionism are:

- an ill-defined membership but a much larger number of supporters who can be counted on to show up for demonstrations or to back strikes;
- a history of being subject to considerable influence from political authorities, who have reason to fear any organization capable of mounting demonstrations;
- a frequent requirement to join a single national center (which the government usually keeps under a tight watch), preventing unions from forming their own independent federations;
- meetings often dominated by debate about obscure ideological points that have little to do with workplace concerns; and
- a weak financial base, leading either to dependency on the government for enforcing a wage deduction system, or on their own membership for buying yearly a "union card" subscription, which is unlikely to provide a great amount of revenue.

THE ECONOMIC WEAKNESS OF AFRICAN UNIONS

On the whole, African unions are relatively weak and powerless organizations. As shown in Table 1, they represent only a miniscule portion of the total workforce because of the small number of workers employed in the formal sector¹ of most African states in comparison to the total workforce. Furthermore, even within this small group, unions can rarely claim more than two-thirds of the workers. The only countries where labor unions might possess enough economic strength to influence policy are those with relatively developed formal sectors. A large concentration of such states exists in southern Africa, where Botswana, Zambia, and Zimbabwe all have relatively strong formal sectors as measured by employment in that sector as a percentage of the total workforce. Outside southern Africa, only Liberia, with its large employment-generating foreign concessions (mines and rubber plantations), and rich but small Gabon exhibit similar formal sector employment patterns. Beyond this short list of countries, formal sector employment is so insignificant in numerical terms that even if labor unions managed to effectively

¹The "formal sector" in Africa describes that part of the economy that is characterized by regular salaried and wage employment, as opposed to the "informal sector," where workers work in family businesses or are self-employed and where there are no standard agreements covering job security or remuneration.

TABLE 1
Workforce, Wage Earners and Union Membership in Selected Countries

COUNTRY	(YEAR)	(A) WORKFORCE ¹ (000)	(B) WAGE EARNERS ² IN FORMAL SECTOR (000)	(C) (B) as % of (A)	(D) SELF-REPORTED ³ UNION MEMBERSHIP (000)	(YEAR)	(E) (D) as % of (B) ⁴
Benin	1981	1,621	74	5%	NA		
Botswana	1982	398	73	18%	8	1984	11%
Burundi	1982	2,128	50	2%	64	1984	120%
Cameroon	1982	3,543	381	11%	NA		
Gabon	1977	303	139	46%	38	1983	
Ghana	1979	4,174	482	12%	467	1984	97%
Ivory Coast	1975	3,506	331	9%	450	1983	
Kenya ⁵	1983	7,400	1,100	15%	300	1983	27%
Liberia	1983	849	200	24%	30	1984	15%
Mali ⁶	1978	4,000	125	3%	67	1978	54%
Niger	1981	1,774	35	2%	15	1984	43%
Nigeria ⁷	1985	37,500	3,000	8%	1,000	1980	33%
Senegal	1982	2,538	117	5%	71	1984	64%
Sudan ⁸	1973	4,443	1,123	25%	282	1971	25%
Tanzania	1981	7,789	622	8%	394	1983	64%
Zambia	1981	1,824	392	21%	282	1983	72%
Zimbabwe	1981	2,351	1,037	44%	162	1984	16%
United States	1981	105,711	100,397	95%			

¹Defined as "economically active population." Source: ILO, Yearbook of Labor Statistics.

²Source: ILO, Yearbook of Labor Statistics.

³Source: US Department of Labor; figures likely to be overestimates.

⁴Percentages are not computed where there is a gap greater than 5 years between the years in which workforce and formal sector employment statistics were collected and the year for which union membership statistics are available. In most cases the only available union membership figures are for several years after the latest laborforce statistics. Because union members are rarely struck from the rolls, the figures in column E may be high. The 120 percent figure for Burundi reflects this overestimation, as well as the notoriously unreliable nature of these statistics.

⁵All Kenyan figures from US Department of Labor.

⁶Malian figures from: George Martens, "Trade Unionism in the Republic of Mali," Labor and Development, July 1983.

⁷Nigerian figures are even more unreliable than the rest and must be considered only rough estimates.

⁸Sudan figures from: Ahmed Hassan el Jack and Chriss Leggett, "Industrial Relations and the Political Process in the Sudan," International Institute for Labour Studies, Research Series, no. 49, 1980.

organize a high percentage of salaried workers, they would still only represent the smallest minority of the total workforce.

Another factor contributing to the economic weakness of African unions is their existence in an environment of extremely high unemployment. The relatively high wages and excellent job security offered in the formal sector creates an excess supply of labor, making the collective bargaining position of African unions extremely weak.

The economic weakness of African unions is exacerbated by the heavy government intervention in industrial relations that is common in Africa. In most countries, unions have almost no role in collective bargaining. Particularly in the French-speaking states, they find that their role in settling industrial disputes is rigidly defined by judicial "codes du travail," or labor codes that limit bargaining and reserve for the government the right to settle disputes according to its priorities. In the English-speaking states, governments have come to play an equally important role even without a historical tradition of labor codes. In Nigeria various governments have made heavy use of wage and price commissions that, both formally and informally, have placed constraints on unions' abilities to engage in collective bargaining. Similarly, in Kenya and Tanzania all wage agreements must be ratified by a labor authority before they can take effect, and in Ghana the government has established a committee responsible for settling major employment policy disputes.

In both anglophone and francophone countries, the preponderant role of the government in settling labor disputes will continue. The difference between the francophone system of labor codes and the common anglophone practice of establishing wage and price commissions is more apparent than real. In each case the labor market is seen as too important a variable in the national economy to be left to the vagaries of freely functioning collective-bargaining, which gives governments strong incentives to regulate. Generally, unions will find that opportunities for them to exercise whatever economic power they have will become progressively rarer as few African governments are likely to loosen their control of the labor market.

THE POLITICAL POWER OF AFRICAN UNIONS

In many respects, African unions find that their lack of economic strength and freedom is compensated by certain political strengths. African labor unions are often the only significant national pan-ethnic organizations with any real foundation. In contrast, many political parties are chaotic constructions with little grassroots involvement or support. Even in such states as Zaire and Mali, where unions are expressly integrated into ruling single parties, the micro-level viability of the unions gives them a strength belied by their formal subordinate status vis-a-vis the political parties. For example, in many parts of Zaire, the National Union of Zairian Workers (UNTZA) is the main social welfare agency, having effectively eclipsed the government and party improvement initiatives. Unions in Africa typically engage in such activities as local improvement projects, consumer cooperatives, fraternal assistance, and adult education. Thus unions sometimes play a much greater part in the lives of their members and their dependents than do the political parties, the supposed agents of mass

mobilization in most countries. In fact, party higher-ups often count on the unions to organize microlevel support for party directives. Similarly, labor unions mount the largest and best-organized street demonstrations, whether for or against government policy.

The peculiar character of the labor movement in Africa, in which almost all of its power is derived from its special political strengths, has resulted in the development of a complex web of government-union relations. Unions have generally been willing to use their organizational capacities to back up governmental policy, and even governments themselves on occasion, as long as governments see to the interests of unionized workers. This system, in which unions count on favorable government intervention in questions of economic policy, as payback for their support on political matters, is known euphemistically as "responsible participation," a concept most African unions have enshrined in their charters.

However, the generally conflict-avoiding tone of government-union relations in Africa is somewhat deceiving. African union leaders are best able to press their demands with government policymakers by privately reminding the political leadership that ignoring the workers might entail certain political costs which either the union leaders or the government will have to face. Within this context, the seemingly sycophantic, "knee-jerk" activities of many African unions, such as passing resolutions of support for government policy or turning out the membership for party rallies, do serve a purpose: they remind the political leaders of the usefulness of unions as progovernment pressure groups. In this manner, unions can amass with governments "political credit" that they hope will pay "economic dividends" when policies are made that affect their members.

As long as African unions retain their microlevel organizational importance, they will continue to play important political roles. The only organizations likely to compete with labor unions as basic units of political mobilization are the revolutionary defense committees (CDRs) set up by the military regimes in Ghana and Burkina. In Ghana, the CDRs are losing what little influence they had and seem incapable of competing with (much less supplanting) the trade unions. In Burkina, where the CDRs are newer and where entropy has not had as much time to work on them, the case is less clear. Yet, of the multiple roles assigned to the Burkinabe CDRs, their role as workplace organizers is their weakest. The Sankara government now seems to be playing up their paramilitary function and de-emphasizing the other aspects of the CDRs, which indicates that CDRs will not pose a serious threat to the established labor unions. Thus, even in Ghana and Burkina, as elsewhere in Africa, labor unions will continue to be politically important.

THE PROSPECT FOR CHANGE IN THE GOVERNMENT-UNION POLITICAL EQUATION

Economic Policy and Political Stability

To some degree in all African states there is a community of interest between labor unions and the government. Nothing bears out the truth of this better than the proliferation of bloated, inefficient public sectors across the continent. Governments in Africa have long followed policies of expanding public sector employment to win popularity. Parastatal and state-owned

enterprises perform many of the key industrial and commercial roles in African economies, making the government by far the largest employer in the formal sector (see Table 2).

Although such policies are usually considered characteristic of socialist governments (which is how the vast majority of African leaders characterize their regimes), the leaders of countries with as diverse ideological leanings as Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, Sudan, Tanzania, Zaire, and Zambia have all found that by expanding public sector employment they can purchase some degree of political stability and enhance their control of the national economy. For example, until 1985 Mali guaranteed civil service employment to every graduate of the public administration and technical schools in Bamako. Likewise, in neighboring Burkina, 70 percent of government receipts are used to pay salaries; a similarly high figure exists for Ghana.

Governments have met the costs of the inflated public payrolls through two principal measures: letting real wages fall, and switching a portion of the overall payroll to the payment in kind of such basic goods as food and housing, which are provided to public workers at controlled below-market prices. This has resulted in the development of a whole complex of public sector worker dependence on government subsidies, not only for their meager salaries, but also for their supply of certain basic goods. In Mali and Sierra Leone, for instance, civil servants receive rice from the government at prices well below those on the open market. Housing allowances are similarly an important part of many African public sector workers' compensation.

The ability of African governments to pay the costs of these policies is contingent on a whole range of inefficient regulatory measures that are now under attack from Western donor agencies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). More importantly though, African leaders themselves are beginning to recognize that they cannot afford to continue to run heavily regulated economies with large numbers of unproductive public sector workers. This recognition has led to a momentous change in the political economy of African states as austerity budgets are introduced and public sector employment and benefits are pared down.

Thus, in many states, a whole political system built up since independence and based on cheap food policies, government salaries with a strong welfare component, and regulated markets for certain goods is being threatened by the economic policies advocated by the Washington-based development institutions. Although it would be easy to overstate African commitment to austerity, the pressing reality of the need to bring expenditures under control is unavoidable for many African leaders. Past policies which promoted labor passivity and made "responsible participation" into a viable political contract are going to be increasingly difficult to maintain now that the donors are following the IMF's lead on aid and the United States is making assistance dependent on the institution of "free market" policies.

AUSTERITY: SOME CURRENT TRENDS IN GHANA, NIGERIA, AND ZAMBIA

The future effects of austerity are apparent in several countries in which economic reforms are sparking a marked increase in the level of tensions

TABLE 2
EMPLOYEES IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS OF SELECTED AFRICAN COUNTRIES

Country	Year	Public Sector Employment ¹ (000)	Private Sector Employment (000)	Public Sector as % of Total Employment
Kenya	1983	527.8	585.5	48%
Mali	1978	88.0	35.5	72%
Malawi	1980	117.6	249.7	32%
Tanzania	1978	385.9	150.0	72%
Ghana	1972	318.0	112.0	74%
Zambia	1980	272.2	87.3	76%

¹Includes parastatal employees

Source: J. Lindauer, "Public Sector Salaries in Africa," World Bank, 1986.
Malian figures from George Martens, "Trade Unionism in the Republic of Mali,"
Labor and Development, July 1983.

between unions and governments. These tensions are particularly visible in Ghana and Nigeria, countries that seem to be entering a period of labor strife that likely will get worse before it gets better, assuming their governments continue their current economic courses.

Ghana

Since the second Rawlings government decided in 1983 to embark on the IMF's economic recovery plan, which has eliminated more than 27,000 public sector jobs, government-union relations have deteriorated considerably. In response to increasing Trade Union Congress (TUC) agitation, in November 1985 the government surrounded the TUC headquarters with armored cars and removed the union's leaders for "interrogation." After this lesson, the TUC avoided street demonstrations until April 1986, when the government decided to eliminate the paid leave allowances of public workers. The matter of leave allowances in Ghana is of particular importance, because the government spends more on leave allowances than it does on the combined health and education budgets. After learning that workers were to have their allowances abolished, on 9 April the TUC instructed its members to take to the streets, a disruption that caused the government to relent on the leave issue. At the same time, the government saved some face with the TUC by cracking down on the open dissent. The mostly left-wing leaders of the protest were arrested and Rawlings accused some individuals within the "labor front" of conspiring with "foreign elements" to destabilize his regime. While it is not completely clear which "foreign elements" Rawlings is talking about, a number of TUC officials exchanged cooperation visits with Soviet labor leaders during the allowance dispute, giving some indication that it is the Soviets who are the source of Rawlings' concern.

Despite the Soviet-TUC connection, foreign influence is not behind the TUC's antigovernment agitation. The underlying motive for the TUC is nothing more than the desire to protect its members' standards of living. After the allowance victory, the TUC is going to become even more militant in its pursuit of that goal. Therefore, if Rawlings remains committed to following the IMF guidelines, union unrest will increase even further.

Nigeria

Austerity is also creating new tensions in Nigeria between the Federal Military Government (FMG), which has reduced the civil service rolls by 30 percent, and the Nigerian Labor Congress (NLC). Although in early 1985 the NLC accepted with little opposition a system under which the salaries of state government employees are paid as a function of state government revenue collection, it has reacted violently to subsequent austerity measures. In particular, the 2 to 15 percent civil service pay cuts announced by the Babangida FMG in November 1985 pushed the NLC (whose leadership was reeling from grassroots criticism for not having opposed the salary system actively enough) to call for a general strike if the cuts were not rescinded. However, not wanting to risk a complete government crack-down on labor, the NLC called off the strike just 4 days before the scheduled general strike. Though the NLC shied away from a full-scale confrontation with the government, this incident illustrates the degree to which the labor movement in Nigeria,

particularly since the banning of political parties, has become the only form of organized opposition to the government.

The seriousness with which the FMG views the NLC's opposition was recently confirmed by the events that occurred in the wake of the 23 May 1986 riot at Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) in Zaria, in which police killed four unarmed students. The NLC, in a show of sympathy for the students, called on its membership to mount a nationwide demonstration on 4 June 1986. The FMG, already feeling its reputation to be tarnished by the ABU incident, was concerned enough to occupy the national and state headquarters of the NLC on the planned date, arrest hundreds of NLC organizers across the country (including Ali Chiroma, the NLC's chief) and generally suppress the demonstration. Although Chiroma and the other NLC leaders were released after a 10-day confinement, with their status as the unofficial opposition remains intact and even enhanced by the FMG's crackdown.

Zambia

Zambia is also facing growing labor unrest because of economic austerity policies. Yet in Zambia, unions have not evolved into the effective opposition forces that they have become in Nigeria and Ghana. Despite the layoff of over 3,000 copper miners and rapidly declining real wages, worker unrest seems to be focused as much on the Mineworkers Union of Zambia (MUZ) as on the government. The leader of the MUZ, Timothy Walamba, is widely perceived to have sold out to the state-owned copper mining company after having accepted a post on its board of directors. During a violent wildcat miners strike in June 1985, the striking miners actually burned down many of the MUZ local headquarters after Walamba agreed to a government-initiated change in the miners' pension arrangements.

Similarly, the other large federation of workers outside the mining industry, the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), has seen its membership decline from 500,000 in 1981 to 380,000 in 1985 as a result of the elimination of jobs in a declining economy. Both unions are prevented by law from sanctioning strikes. Thus, despite an economic situation at least as bad as that in Nigeria and the presence of a large group of disaffected workers, the two main Zambian unions have actually grown weaker. The MUZ is divided by internal dissention and the ZCTU, with its declining membership, is in no position to challenge the government. Therefore, neither group is likely to mount any serious threat to the Kaunda regime in the near future.

In Ghana, Nigeria, and Zambia, austerity is at the root of increasing labor unrest. Yet this unrest has different implications for Zambia on the one hand, and for Nigeria and Ghana on the other. In Zambia, the unrest presents little threat to the government. The Zambian labor movement remains too fragmented to constitute a viable national force. The division between the mineworkers (MUZ) and all other workers (ZCTU) is one problem facing Zambian labor. Another is the fact that both federations have their powerbases in the copperbelt region and tend to be ethnically identified with the Bemba, leaving them substantially weaker in Lusaka and the rest of the country. This lack of national unity will prevent Zambian labor unrest from being channeled against the government in any organized manner. By contrast, in Ghana and Nigeria, labor unions have succeeded in building the national

unity necessary to demand consideration and even accomodation from the governments in power. The TUC and NLC will continue to play vital roles in Ghanaian and Nigerian politics, even though neither organization will be able to mount a true regime-threatening challenge to the present military governments, which will remain secure as long as they retain the support of key army units.

LABOR UNIONS AND LEFT WING OPPORTUNITIES: THE CASES OF SUDAN AND BURKINA FASO

As was shown by the Ghanaian and Nigerian examples, labor unions have certain unique organizational qualities that make them appropriate vehicles for political mobilization. For example, labor union leadership posts attract politically ambitious people, and it is not at all unusual for labor leaders to become ministers. Leftists in particular seem to be drawn to labor union leadership posts. Furthermore, the importance of labor unions as an avenue to political prominence is magnified in states where organizing political opposition is banned but where labor is allowed a relatively free rein. In such states, the labor movement characteristically takes on the status of a de facto opposition.

However, only very rarely does such opposition represent a serious threat to the regime in power. Such a threat occurs only when there are factors that weaken the regime. Numeri's April 1985 fall from power in Sudan, spurred mainly by the union-generated unrest created by a general strike, is one of the few occasions when unions have played a major role in the fall of a regime. In this case, serious economic problems, Numeri's erratic behavior, and the repression of almost every political group in Sudan combined to erode Numeri's support, leaving him vulnerable. The general strike was the final straw which convinced the army to step in and oust Numeri. However, although almost every political group in the country cooperated with the strike (a singular occurrence in itself), the desired replacement of Numeri could not have been achieved had not the army acted. Thus, even in Sudan, where labor unions have had more political success than in any other African state, they still depend on the support of wider groups (the most important being the army).

The Sudanese labor situation is unusual because nowhere else have political opportunists so obviously used the labor movement as a front for their political goals. For example, the trade union group that called the April 1985 general strike, the Trade Union Alliance (TUA), is not a true labor union. It is closely related to the Khartoum University group of professionals and is more interested in propagating that group's political philosophy than in bread-and-butter labor organization. However, since April 1985, the consensus in Sudanese politics over Numeri has disappeared and so, too, has the TUA's influence. Its micro-level irrelevance and inability to tackle the leading economic questions facing Sudan mean that it is becoming redundant as the newly legal political parties take over its political role. A similar union body has been formed by the National Islamic Front (NIF--formerly the Muslim Brotherhood). This organization, the National Trade Union Front (NTUF), is active in organizing demonstrations but is little concerned with the workplace. The NTUF, which organized a large and violent demonstration against the dissident Sudanese Peoples' Liberation Army in September 1985, may be around a little longer, for it seems to have some use as a "street thug"

organ of the NIF. Thus, while the union opportunists in Sudan did enjoy popular support for a limited time and were able to capitalize on it by convincing the army to take over, they have been less successful at maintaining their influence.

There exists a similar group of leftist intellectual unionists in Burkina Faso who have had even less success in exercising influence on the national scene despite being included in the Sankara government during its first years in power (August 1983-August 1984). This group, the Burkinabe Trade Union Confederation (CSB), is closely related to--and, indeed, almost indistinguishable from--the Marxist Patriotic League for Development (LIPAD). LIPAD-CSB enjoyed a certain reputation from its historical role as a constant left-wing critic of various Burkinabe regimes; thus, its inclusion in the original Sankara government caused some concern about the new regime's ideological inclinations.

However, LIPAD-CSB soon wore out its welcome when, in May 1984, its leader, Soumane Toure, tried to insert himself as head of the Revolutionary Defense Committees (CDRs). An unevenly matched power struggle ensued between the LIPAD-CSB civilian ideologues and the Sankara-led young military leaders, ending with LIPAD's expulsion from the government in August and Soumane Toure's arrest in October. Since Toure's jailing, the leaderless CSB is rapidly losing strength as its members switch to less politically active unions.

As both the Sudanese and Burkinabe examples show, there are limits to the usefulness of labor unions as tools for reaching purely political objectives. Such politically oriented unions tend to lack grassroots support, which leaves them vulnerable to government repression. For instance, Soumane Toure's arrest elicited little popular condemnation, which would not have been the case had the CSB possessed a strong local organization. Unions that are nothing more than political fronts, such as the CSB and TUA, will find themselves ill equipped to offer serious challenges to status-quo governments. These unions' isolation and organizational dependence on a few top leaders will prevent them from realizing their more ambitious political goals. Thus the threat to stability posed by "labor opportunists" will be of minimal significance.

TRENDS FOR EXTERNAL INFLUENCES ON AFRICAN UNIONS

Currently, the official policy of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) is to discourage African labor unions from maintaining extensive relations with extracontinental labor organizations. A formal, if not totally effective, requirement for membership in the OAU's labor organization, the Organization of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU), is that African unions cannot maintain affiliations with non-African labor organizations except for the International Labor Organization (ILO). Nevertheless, many unions which belong to the OATUU still maintain affiliations with either of the two Western-based international confederations, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) or the smaller World Confederation of Labor (WCL), as well as the Prague-based World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). (Table 3 lists the countries whose unions maintain links with extracontinental bodies.) These links give African unions strong claims for yearly infusions of cash and

TABLE 3

**Countries with Unions Maintaining Affiliations with
Extracontinental Confederations**

WCL	ICFTU
Burkina Faso	Botswana
Central African Republic	Burkina Faso
	Lesotho
	Liberia
	Madagascar
	Malawi
	Sierra Leone
WFTU	ICATU
Angola	
Benin	
Burkina Faso	
Congo	
Ethiopia	
Guinea-Bissau	
Madagascar	
	Sudan
	Mauritania

Key: WCL: World Confederation of Labor
WFTU: World Federation of Trade Unions
ICFTU: International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
ICATU: International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions

Source: US Department of Labor

travel benefits from their overseas patrons. Any money African unions receive from foreign sources reduces their dependence on home governments, which may be one reason why recent government feeling on the continent is so unfavorable to "foreign" involvement." Whatever the reason, however, these cooperative relationships, particularly with the ICFTU, are often regarded as evidence of neocolonial control.

The OATUU is currently paralyzed by a dispute between those who wish to enforce the ban on extracontinental linkages and those who favor the present system of ignoring the ban. This dispute points out the fundamental irrelevance of the OATUU. Understandably, unions in some countries are unenthusiastic about giving up their lucrative relationships with the ICFTU and WFTU to belong to a body that produces only yearly talk-fests and actually costs them money. The anti-affiliation group, led by the Kenyan OATUU Secretary-General Dennis Akumu, has tried (presumably out of reflex) to present the pro-affiliation group, led by the ex-Nigerian Labor Congress leader Hassan Sunmonu, as being pawns of a "US/imperialist plot." (This controversy puts Sunmonu, a committed leftist, in the ironic situation of having to defend a position favorable to the West). In May 1985, Akumu accused the AFL-CIO's African labor cooperation organization, the African-American Labor Center (AALC), of conspiring with the CIA to "separate the workers' struggle from that of the liberation movement in South Africa." Nobody takes Akumu's allegation of US pro-affiliation subterfuge seriously, however, because the WFTU affiliates in such countries as Angola, Benin, Congo, and Guinea-Bissau have joined with unions from Nigeria, Senegal, and Zimbabwe to oppose the hard line against extra-continental affiliation. After the most recent OATUU conference in February 1986, the rebel pro-affiliation faction split from the Akumu-led loyalists. Each group elected its own officers, and each now claims to be the "real" OATUU.

These developments present a dilemma for Libya, which has been the main underwriter of the OATUU. In 1985 Libya contributed \$70,000 to the OATUU budget (27 percent of the total) and pledged to increase its commitment to \$100,000 in 1986. Also, since 1973 the largely honorary president's post has been occupied by a Libyan. The demise of the unified OATUU, thus, will deprive Libya of one forum where it enjoyed substantial influence. Whether or not Libya will continue to financially support the Akumu faction remains to be seen. But even if Libya does continue to support the hard-line loyalists, its influence will be reduced by the split. Of course, the Libyans may yet come to the conclusion that money spent on the OATUU is wasted. If the OATUU were to fade from existence, a distinct possibility, perhaps the only consequence would be that African governments would lose a convenient pasture for troublesome labor leaders.

Despite eagerness on the part of the African unions to retain their extracontinental links, it is doubtful that their overseas patrons will derive much political influence from these relationships. The East bloc labor organization, the WFTU, suffers from the disadvantage of being considerably poorer than the main Western groups (principally the AALC and the ICFTU) that maintain active cooperation agreements with African unions. The East is known in African labor circles more for its donations of ponderous ideological books than for effective cooperation.

Although the East bloc is not likely to score any major political victories through its support of African labor movements, this does not mean it cannot influence certain key figures. Jerry Rawlings' accusation about certain Ghanaian labor leaders' conspiring with "foreign elements," meaning the Soviets, indicates that the Soviets actively court African labor leaders. As the repercussions of austerity spread, such attempts are likely to be intensified.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

In general, African labor unions are of only peripheral concern to the United States. Their membership rolls are too small for them to play leading roles in determining the foreign orientation of their countries. However, the likelihood of increased government-union conflict because of austerity carries some wider implications for US interests. The possibility that austerity-related economic dislocation could spark a new wave of anti-Americanism cannot be ignored. Laying off large numbers of public sector workers creates hostility which, in as much as the United States is perceived as forcing African governments to carry out such policies, could, at the very least, cause a serious public relations problem and might also have more serious repercussions for US-African relations. This problem is magnified by the belief common to many Africans that the United States is the guiding force behind the international organizations, like the IMF and the World Bank, which impose specific policy reforms as conditions for aid disbursements.

Soviet attempts to exploit these perceptions are to be expected. Recently laid-off workers, in a country where the IMF is imposing cut-backs in public spending and subsidies, are a natural target for Soviet propaganda. Western labor organizations, such as the AALC, which maintain strong links with African unions, will become important vehicles for combating the view that the West is fundamentally hostile toward the African worker.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, unions will pose little serious threat to governments that maintain the support of their security forces. In some countries, unions may exist only on paper. In others, although they exist and may hold meetings and elect officers, they will have little impact on the political scene. This will even be true of a country like Zaire, where, despite the fact that the national labor union is a large well organized social institution, it exercises little political independence. For an even smaller group of countries, in which freedom of political organization is allowed, unions will continue to find that whatever political power they once possessed rapidly evaporates in a climate where open opposition is permitted. Only in a few countries have labor unions evolved into viable forces that, to varying degrees, occasionally oppose their governments. But even in Ghana and Nigeria, which have well-established traditions of labor independence, labor has been unable to do much to prevent the governments from making cuts that adversely affect workers' living standards. The most impact unions in these countries are likely to make is an occasional reversal of a particularly onerous policy, a feat not likely to produce any serious destabilization of the existing regimes.

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